

CHAPTER 9

The Significance of ‘Role-Play’ and ‘Instruction-Based Performance’ as Modes of Teaching, Collaborating, and Performing with/for Participating Audiences

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Abstract

ZU-UK distilled strategies developed for their all-night participatory performance, *Hotel Medea* (2006-2012), into a “dramaturgy of participation” (Lopes Ramos and Maravala 2016): a training and performance-making approach drawing on combined non-Western, non-commercial praxes from which the company has emerged (including Brazilian, Eastern European, Persian and Indian body-based and spiritual traditions). Subsequently, ZU-UK’s work has moved further beyond the confines of theatre and performer-training but continues to focus on participation and working with emerging artists towards generating post-immersive collaborative models that reject neo-liberal pressures for scale, reproducibility, and escape, in favor of intimacy, specificity and awareness. We examine “role-play” and “instruction-based performance” as modes of teaching and performing that, in conjunction with social role theory after Goffman (1959), become strategies for political activation. Examples used demonstrate the analogue of positioning audiences and students as makers of their own experiences and compelling them to think about who work is *by*, *with*, and *for*.

Introduction

ZU-UK intends to focus learning around intentions, contextual awareness, and exploration of what it means to collaborate. Role, or role-play, and instruction-systems, have become two key structures through which ZU-UK facilitate engagement with these focal points: in formal education, in our own training and development, and in the participatory experiences we make.

The following examples of role-play and instruction in ZU-UK performance-work and workshops serve as illustrations of what we consider vital to impart to future generations of artists working

with participation and live interaction. At the root of the decision-making processes we make, and wish to convey to others, lie the simple, contextual questions of:

Who is it by?

Who is it with?

Who is it for?

The ways of understanding role-play and corresponding content-creation exercises offered below are springboards from which to develop performative workshop structures that guide participants through micro-enactments of the social and political aspects of their roles as creators, and that foreground these core questions.

These priorities, and the embodied ways in which they are present in our workshop models, are the inevitable extension of our performer-training methodology, the “dramaturgy of participation” (Lopes Ramos and Maravala 2016), in turn derived from the legacies of Augusto Boal, Jerzy Grotowski and Milon Mela, spiritual dance and theatrical practices of North-East Brazil, Capoeira Angola, Bharatanatyam, and Zoroastrian religious incantation, and our experience contending with the complex requirements of the overnight audience-centric multi-site performance, *Hotel Medea* (2006-12), developed over a period of seven years. What we have drawn from this combination of influences and experiences can roughly be summarized as a relational aesthetic grounded in the co-presence of human bodies and the space in between them. The body, and connections between bodies in space, as the meaningful material of politically active performance-work and the site of transformation, remain essential to the ways in which we facilitate exploration of these questions.

The following examples do not explicitly foreground any form of physical training. Physical training is, however, key to the game-making exercise detailed below. As the exercise develops, we quickly draw attention to political meanings that attach themselves to spatial relationships between the bodies present as they shift through different roles.

Framing Role-Play

ZU-UK's practice has emerged from a set of primarily theatrical influences, but the use of role-play in our work has come to mean something more subtle and flexible than the adoption of character or fictional circumstance associated with the term as a theatrical improvisation device, or indeed usually associated with practices like tabletop or digital RPGs (Role-Playing Games) or LARP (Live Action Role-Play). Role-play in ZU-UK's work is usually something more like trying out versions of self, than trying on the shoes of another, and the roles to try out are usually constructed through autobiographical prompts and reflections that intensify participants' awareness of their histories, identities, and values. Correspondingly, self-reflective exercises, such as automatic writing and instruction-based activities built around personal questions, as ways into a creative process are prominent in our workshops. There is no hard and fast barrier between ZU-UK public performance structures, and ZU-UK workshop-design: the fluidity between these two purposes is made sense of in the light of 1) our performances themselves being catalysts for co-creative contributions from participants (who are thus drawn out, and explore their own impulses, as creative learners, as it were), and 2) our conviction that the heightened, performative, contractually bounded state entered into through a participatory artwork is conversely of great value in pedagogical contexts: workshops are in fact always essentially designed as miniature instruction-based artworks. To contextualise the use of role- and perspective-shifting, and self-reflection in pedagogy, it is therefore useful to consider the nature and presence of these as tools within ZU-UK performance work.

Binaural Dinner Date (2016-), for example, (a ZU-UK experience for eighteen people, divided into nine couples) is a self-reflective audio-guided date that invites participants, with the slogan “#BeTheDate,” to hack into the web of coded interactions that constitute the “secular ritual” (Lopes Ramos, Maravala, Dunne-Howrie, and Simon 2020) of dating, and inhabit its behavioral systems, as bodies. The roles it coaxes people into and out of are fluid, and relational rather than fictional. The performance establishes a shifting set of contractual boundary-lines, to elevate the performance event to an “extra-daily” (Barba 1988) realm: a plurality of frames (Calleja 2012; Consalvo 2009; Duggan, 2017; Fine 2002), rather than a single “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955).

Over the course of their date, participants ask and respond to questions that call upon deeply personal, real memories, experiences, and self-perceptions. They perform themselves to the person

sat opposite them, becoming acutely aware of the Butlerian tenet (1997), also espoused by Goffman (1959), that they are always performing themselves. They often begin to ironically play into the cliché they have been invited to perform — that of the romantic dinner-date. The experience invites a sway between real and self-consciously performed identities. For example, one of the games participants undertake with their date consists of a collaborative storytelling exercise, based on ‘choose your own adventure’ structures, in which three couples create one shared imagined future for themselves as long-term partners. This imagined future, guided by a waiter-facilitator, includes church bells, babies, relationship-counselling, extra-marital affairs, and dementia: participants are aware that the story is fabricated, and cannot apply to all three couples engaged in this task. It is shamelessly fictional. Magic-trick aesthetics, including a live-operated soundtrack seemingly timed miraculously to participants’ responses, allow participants to deal with such contradictions seamlessly, whilst remaining very much themselves.

In *Hotel Medea*, participants, likewise, segued between various roles, and modes of role-play — experiencing, for example, the same “micro-event” (Lopes Ramos 2015) three times, from different perspectives: as Medea’s children in bunk-beds, as Jason’s campaign team in a separate room filled with screens and headphones, and as Medea’s guests in her bedroom — each one offering a different type of engagement through both fictional and functional roles: roles *in relation* to the narrative, or event, but not characters, as such. As Medea’s children, participants were told a bedtime story, given hot cocoa, and invited to actually sleep up to twenty minutes if they wished. This perspective-switching through physically immersive role-play generates a feeling of disorientation, but also of depth of experience. Shifting participatory modes, between critical awareness and deep, active engagement in experiences, sharpens overall impact.

The role-play participants engage in, in ZU-UK’s work, is thus not a pre-written role description in the usual way one might be invited to ‘play a role’ or character, but there is an ‘otherness’ that participants adopt, which enables behaviors that are unusual, or even impermissible in ordinary life. Participants’ contributions of their own biographical details consistently draw them back to themselves, to their own realities, and to the present moment, meaning every individual’s experience is emphatically their own, and cannot be replicated.

Game-Play & Instruction-Systems

Examining, experientially, who we are in relation to the social systems we function through, and in relation to each other, forms not only a huge component of what ZU-UK invite those we teach and coach to think about, but also dictates the ways we structure workshops and sessions with students and mentees. As our performances invite participants to be makers of their own experiences, and turn their perceptions of self into artistic material, it has been natural for us to use structures similar to those we use within performances themselves to onboard students and emerging artists to our educational programs. Exercises to spark creation become very similar to our approach with audiences. They differ, in that they tend to address participants directly as makers or researchers in active pursuit of their own goals, and thus can jump more quickly to instructions eliciting fairly high-level creative contribution, but otherwise the playful strategies used to prompt input from students are essentially the same as those forming the frameworks of ZU-UK performance work.

Key to this approach is the use of rule-systems, game mechanics, and, above all, instructions. Firstly, central to the process of creating games and rules is an understanding of “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost 2007) — the way that these systems embody ideology in their structures. By understanding how mini-social-systems like games express rhetoric in their rules, we not only gain a critical vantage point on games and structures, but also begin to consider how to think about games as social structures invented with the purpose of creating social order along very distinct lines for very distinct agendas. In designing pedagogical content, in particular, we highlight accountability and responsibility for the ways in which we, and those we teach, instruct our guests, players and participants, and the difficulty of avoiding biases, assumptions about who your participants are, and creating spaces of exclusivity. Our workshops and exercises draw attention to the fact that we may think we are designing for a neutral player, or participant, but that there are always assumptions behind our image of this societally neutral player. We forget that “[t]he masses are made up of people and white, cis-gendered, het, middle-class men are a minority in that.” (Nicklin, 2019). We urge artists to design for difference and variance, rather than a mythical neutrality.

Secondly, instructions in ZU-UK work can be seen as tools handed to participants, students, or mentees, with which to create their own paths and experiences. The word, ‘instruction’, conflates the idea of telling somebody what to do, with the process of teaching itself. It makes one synonymous with the other. ZU-UK have come to a belief, through practice, that playing into this conflation can in fact serve to challenge, subvert, and reconfigure power structures assumed within artist-audience, teacher-student relationships. They can:

- a) create “pockets of agency”- focused, tiny spaces of freedom, which, in being well marked out, and subject to rules, provide the safety required for intimacy and wildness to become possible,
- b) absolve participants or students, temporarily, of responsibility, to allow for unfettered self-exploration, and thus...
- c) remind us, with compassion, that we are always authors of our actions and experiences within the systems that house us.

ZU-UK instructions are a gentle trick: persuading us we are not in control, to remind us of the power of response.

Exhibit A: Speed-Game Making (Stage 1)

The parameters and instructions that make up the speed game-making exercise, used here as a sample, aim to guide those involved through a series of different roles in relation to creating content, and in relation to the participants in what they have created. First you are encouraged to simply make a game, without any emphasis on message, meaning, or even aesthetic intention: you embody a very early ideation stage of a process, or the sort of naive relationship to artmaking that ZU-UK wants to challenge. You are then encouraged to think about the frontier between your creation and the world: how will you present and explain it to others? How will you hand it over such that participants’ experience of it is theirs, but is in line with your intentions? The parameter preventing game-makers from instructing or interfering, once their game is running, highlights the importance of instruction as the interface, as it were, between artist and audience, and that the ways in which a piece is framed and contextualized form an essential part of what is experienced. How does a piece convey to participants the ‘right’ behaviors within its temporary micro-community?

Subsequent stages of the exercise guide participants through further role-shifts in their relation to the game-content and aid the process of building more complex, layered systems. The example below details a research-related provocation as a gateway into a second stage, but sometimes the ZU-UK facilitators will ask students to ‘hack’ games created by others and repurpose them with specific intentions in mind — or they might be asked to hack their own games with a more considered awareness of themselves as creators of political, rhetorical systems. We want those we teach and coach to come to an understanding of these phenomena through embodying them and modelling various roles in relation to content-creation.

The sample below is limited to a description of Stage 1 only of this exercise process.

Participants are split into small groups of 3-5 people:

Choose one complete set of artefacts from the selection laid out in front of you.

(Artefacts include: a set of clothes pegs, a set of large dice, a set of mini traffic cones, a set of ribbons, etc.)

Within ten minutes, each group will create a game using only your chosen artefacts.

At the end of ten minutes you need to have created a game and decided:

ITS NAME; ITS RULES; HOW MANY PLAYERS CAN TAKE PART; HOW YOU WILL EXPLAIN & DEMO IT TO OTHERS BEFORE THEY PLAY

You will have one minute to present your game to the whole group.

Finally, allow players to play your game for no longer than one to three minutes.

A high-pressured timeframe exerts “exquisite pressure” (Bogart and Landau 2005) and helps preclude detailed critical thinking from this stage in order to heighten the impression of detached observation when creators are encouraged to add in a critical lens in subsequent stages. While players play each newly created game, the group of creators observe their players closely - however, they are also told they cannot help or instruct the players whilst they play. Only this way will they be able to observe shortcomings in their design, explanation, and demo, as well as what kinds of behaviors have been encouraged by their design. This oscillating, iterative trajectory— between making and observing — is a miniature enactment of a layer-by-layer playtesting

structure common to many interactive performance-making methodologies, where analysing the effects of specific design elements on the behavior of participants is essential to development.

Exhibit B: Speed Game-Making (Stage 2)

During a speed game-making session run by ZU-UK and commissioned by UCL in 2018, ZU-UK invited researcher Malu Gatto to provide a small provocation after the first stage of the exercise, described above. Gatto spoke to the injustices and failures of democracy, with particular regard to women in Brazil (the focus of her research). ZU-UK directors then instructed game-designer groups to use Gatto's provocation to modify their design with the sole purpose of instigating anger in their players. The instructions followed:

Return to your game-making groups...

Now the task is to embed inequalities or injustices or unfairness into your game.

The idea is to keep it subtle.

The idea is to make it hidden but in plain sight.

The unfairness is clear and yet justifiable.

Or worse, made the fault of the disadvantaged.

We will experience both the advantaged (read: privileged) position of the players and the disadvantaged positions.

This is a brief example of how ZU-UK adapts its pedagogical exercise in game-making to respond to specific intentions from participants as makers — in this case, to incorporate a thematic intervention from a guest researcher to expose and explore procedural rhetoric within participation models. The content is interchangeable but makes the exercise specific every time, and the speed game-making exercise itself is the permanent scaffold. The exercise is structured to reveal, simply by a process of modelling and iterating, that by creating participatory structures as artists, we are crafting laws: artists are lawmakers, and their laws convey ideologies. Certain behaviors become permissible, or are disallowed, censored, or edited, according to the systems established. The ultimate aim is to alert students, or collaborators, participating in the exercise, to our

responsibilities as makers: the models we design through which people participate in our work are persuasive, and as soon as we put them out into the world, we are responsible for what they are saying and doing. This is valid for any kind of artwork, but particularly salient for those interested in the kinds of explicitly participatory work that ZU-UK deals with. Who develops the work, who the work is tested and developed with, and ultimately who it is for are all crucial to an awareness of the maker's responsibility. Further stages of this exercise can take different routes depending on intended outcomes. One route will encourage participants to focus less on the game, and its rules, but instead on the roles that emerge for each player as a result of their design. By continuously iterating the game to support the development of 'roles' — mainly practical, seldom fictional — makers also become aware of the multi-player possibilities of their design, and how audience-to-audience (or player-to-player) engagement can be developed.

Conclusion

ZU-UK's creative processes can take years, sometimes decades, of playtesting, iterating and 'hacking' structures with new contents for new purposes — always specific to the site and audience/players involved. Based on this lived experience, our approach to pedagogy departs from very simple, clear and accessible starting points, which serve as a careful foundation onto which a critical process of creation and layering can begin to be built and continue to unfold — one step at a time, and brick by brick— with the inclusion of multiplayer dynamics, embodiment, role-play, and instructions. It is crucial to the politics of our participatory models that our performances are, both in format and in impact, *instructional*, and that our work as pedagogical *instructors* of makers and artists is playful, performative and situates creativity within the freedom of response and interpretation.

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